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CROSSED WIRES IN THEIR SKULLS

STUART CHASE has hopes for his grandchildren, provided they are given the right education. He wants that education to begin in the kindergarten, which seems to me to postpone things dangerously in the life of any normal child; but whenever it begins, the kind of education he is talking about will make his grandchildren "immune to ideologies", so that they will not "waste most of their energy fighting

apparitions which come from crossed wires in their skulls". They will be free from the handicap under which "this unhappy generation" suffers, and then they can "resolve the paradox of plenty with one hand tied behind them" and "banish war forever."

IDEOLOGICAL IMMUNITY?

I LIKE the phrase "crossed wires in their skulls", for it leaves the door open for the possibility that the wires in my skull, or yours, or even Mr. Chase's, may occasionally get themselves crossed. As a matter of fact, I think they sometimes do. For a tough-minded critic, who hates fuzzy thinking, ghosts made out of words, pious beliefs, verbal bombs, and wishful thinking, this article of Stuart Chase's in a recent issue of *The New Republic* deserves honorable mention, if not first prize, as a demonstration of the difficulty of acquiring the immunity it advocates. "An ideology might be described as an emotional attachment to a noise", and I suggest that "ideological immunity" is a lovely example of the sort of "noise" to which natural and commendable emotions—such as affectionate solicitude for one's grandchildren—can easily become attached.

Perhaps it is merely a native perverseness in my disposition—a small, satanic kink in my mental machinery—but something always tempts me to

rise in defence of any of our common human frailties that happens to be under fire from the self-appointed guardians of the public welfare. Just now, it is fashionable to attack the way in which the ordinary man does what he calls his thinking, and there is undoubtedly a lot to be said against it. A chemical analysis—qualitative and quantitative—of the products of much of our so-called thinking would in all probability disclose a high percentage of nonsense, with perhaps only "traces" of truth; and I am willing to admit that the world would be a happier place for all of us if we could master the technique of straight thinking, and apply it where it is applicable.

IN PITIABLE PLIGHT

BUT the sad fact is that most of us will have to live out our allotted span without that great advantage. Possibly our grandchildren, like Mr. Chase's, may acquire an immunity to fuzzy thinking that will be as efficient as immunity to typhoid; but where does that leave *us?* Helpless victims under a shower of verbal bombs? Unhappy and defenceless in the face of a barrage of malicious propaganda? Intellectually bankrupt and emotionally infantile? So it would seem, if we take literally and uncritically the doleful verbiage of those who believe in the new science of semantics—which is, in my

opinion, neither new nor scientific, but which for the moment is "all the rage".

At this point, the healthy-minded adult is likely to explode; and it will do him good to indulge in a few verbal bombs of his own. (If he is a parson, he should go very quietly into his sound-proof study, shut the door, and employ his full stock of expletives without inhibitions of any kind. He will be a wiser and gentler minister when he comes out.)

IN DEFENCE OF FUZZY THINKING

ONE thing at any rate must be conceded by the bitterest foe of fuzzy thinking. Thus far, in spite of its almost universal prevalence and its diabolic power for evil, it has not wiped out the human race. Jeremiah sang, "It is of the Lord's mercy that we are not consumed"; and whether we call it God's mercy or not, it is plain that something has enabled us to survive, with all our muddle-headed pretensions to being intelligent. A contemporary poet reminds us that America "is a tough land under the corn, Mister", which is a modern version of Jeremiah's reassuring word. Somehow, in spite of all the logic, we are still here. Not even fuzzy thinking has, as yet, completely destroyed us.

But there is more than that to be said in defence of fuzzy thinking. Certain ideas appear to thrive

better, and are more easily communicated, when we deliberately lay aside the intention of thinking with strict logic and scientific accuracy. Straight thinking is an excellent thing in its place, but its "place" has definite boundaries. There are other regions where another sort of thinking is useful, even if its critics call it fuzzy. With one very important proviso—namely, that we keep clearly in mind what we are doing. When fuzzy thinking masquerades as straight thinking, it has no defence or excuse whatever.

IF HE KNOWS WHAT HE IS DOING

AMONG the apocryphal sayings attributed to Jesus, there is one that has direct application here. The disciples, walking with their master one Sabbath day, called his attention to a man who was plowing. I suppose they expected Jesus to condemn him for breaking the law, but what he said was this: "If he knows what he is doing, blessed is he".

That must have puzzled the disciples. Don't you mean just the opposite? Don't you mean that if he doesn't know what he is doing—if he has forgotten that this is the Sabbath—he can be excused for breaking the law?

Not at all! If he doesn't know that he is plowing on the Sabbath, then he is careless and worthy of blame. But if he does know, if he has thought

it out and decided that the needs of his land are more important than the details of the ceremonial law—if he knows what he is doing—then he is not merely not blameworthy, he is blessed.

A BETTER NAME FOR IT

WHEN we do deliberately what thus far I have been willing to call fuzzy thinking—knowing what we are doing and why—we are engaging in one of the oldest and one of the most rewarding of all human activities; and I think it is now time to call it by its right name.

"And there were in the same country shepherds, abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them, and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not, for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day, in the city of David, a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord."

That isn't straight thinking. It isn't astronomy, or geology, or biology, or anthropology, or sociology, or history, or theology, or semantics. It isn't meant to be any of those things. If you have that sort of mind, you can call it fuzzy thinking, or an ideology, or whatever you please.

Perhaps Stuart Chase would call it a noise to which emotional attachment is fatally easy. But the right name for it, of course, is poetry.

NOT A LUXURY BUT A NECESSITY

IN using that word, I realize that when anything is called poetry it may be instantly dismissed from serious consideration. The notion that poetry is a luxury, a decoration, a harmless but not important affair, in which people with no real responsibilities may be allowed to indulge, provided they keep it out of sight and out of the way—that notion is surely a product of crossed wires in human skulls; but it is still widely held. In my opinion, it has more to do with the present state of the world than all the ideologies put together.

For ideas which move men to heroism can only be communicated by poetry, and when poetry is regarded as something not to be taken seriously the result is fatal to all high and sacrificial endeavor. Peace, for example, is not a matter of economics or political organization, but a matter of human will power. Given the will to peace, economic and political machinery becomes vitally important, as the means by which the desired end may be achieved. But without the will, no machinery will serve; and the will to peace is stirred and stiffened by poetry—not by statistics; by

songs—not by mathematical formulas. Chemistry knows nothing of angels; but when peace comes on this earth, it will be because men have at last learned to listen to the song the angels sang, above the wintry hills of Judaea, a long, long time ago.

F. M. E.

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